

## Legislation aims to help Keystone lakes

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Legislation filed by state Sen. Rob Bradley, R-Fleming Island, is intended to protect the Keystone Heights chain of lakes as well as the St. Johns River.

Keystone Heights in southwest Clay County is at the heart of the Etonia Chain of Lakes – six lakes serving as a major recharge area for the Floridan aquifer supplying drinking water throughout Northeast Florida.

On Jan. 3, Bradley filed Senate Bill 234, which would require the state to spend a minimum of \$35 million annually from Amendment 1 – commonly known as the Florida Water and Land Conservation Initiative adopted in 2014 – to fund projects that preserve or provide public access to the river and the Keystone Heights lakes.

The proposed measure is “very personal for me,” said Bradley, who is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the Environment and Natural Resources.

“I grew up on the banks of the St. Johns River and visited the lakes of Keystone Heights as a child, and my family enjoys these incredible gifts from God today. ... These natural resources define the character of the northeast Florida region of our state,” Bradley said.

Located on a high sand ridge, the lakes receive stormwater runoff, inflow from upstream lakes and groundwater infiltration from the surficial aquifer system.

The lakes lose water primarily through evaporation and seepage into the Upper Floridan aquifer, according to the St. Johns River Water Management District, which has taken part in past and current initiatives to try to remedy the situation.

Florida voters overwhelmingly adopted Amendment 1 in 2014. That a constitutional amendment mandating that the Legislature spend one-third of documentary stamp tax revenues on environmental preservation efforts. The bill directs a portion of those dollars to the river and Keystone Heights lakes region.

“As a conservative, I believe in absolute fidelity to the state Constitution,” Bradley continued. “The Constitution requires us to protect these natural resources, as we should, and this bill helps fulfill that constitutional obligation to the people of the northeast Florida.”

The Florida Legislature convenes its regular session March 7 in Tallahassee.

As written, Bradley’s bill states \$35 million annually will be appropriated to the St. Johns River Water Management District “for projects dedicated to the restoration of the St. Johns River and its tributaries or the Keystone Heights Lake Region.”

That money may be used for land management and acquisition and for recreational opportunity and public access improvements connected with these areas, according to the proposed legislation, which if passed would be effective July 1, 2017.

The funding would come from the state Land Acquisition Trust Fund, which is used to carry out the Florida Water and Land Conservation Initiative of 2014, the bill states.

The initiative was designed to dedicate 33 percent of net revenue from the existing excise tax on documents to the Land Acquisition Trust Fund.

The trust fund is intended to acquire and improve conservation easements, wildlife management areas, wetlands, forests, fish and wildlife habitats, beaches and shores, recreational trails and parks, urban open space, rural landscapes, working farms and ranches, historical and geological sites, lands protecting water and drinking water resources and lands in the Everglades Agricultural Areas and the Everglades Protection Area.

It also was designed to manage and restore natural systems and to enhance public access and recreational use of conservation lands.

Bradley recently was appointed subcommittee chairman by Senate President Joe Negron.

“President Negron and I share a passion for implementing real solutions to the environmental challenges facing our state in the 21st century, from Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades to our springs to the St. Johns River. Not only do we need to insure that our water is clean, but we need to insure the public has reasonable access to these wonderful natural assets for all time,” Bradley said.

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